

The Victorian Era Houses of Garrett Park

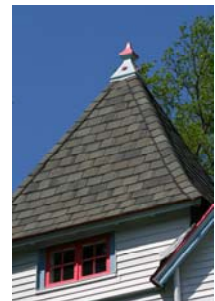
When the officers of the Metropolitan Investment and Building Company started to lay out their ambitious railroad suburb in 1887, they were very much influenced by the Romantic Movement in architecture and landscape design. The curving streets that mold to the hilly topography demonstrate the desire to enhance, rather than subdue, the natural terrain. The plan of Garrett Park has a great deal in common with the plans of the great 19th century cemeteries and urban and battlefield parks. The houses that were placed within this plan tended to be eclectic, informal, and decorative. Although many are large—or give the impression of being large—they were often referred to as “cottages,” a term used for country or summer houses in the late 19th century. Some of Garrett Park’s early homes were year-round dwellings, but others were initially used as summer retreats from the heat of Washington.

Most of Garrett Park’s earliest homes can be described as versions—of varying sophistication—of the wooden Queen Anne style which was popular for free-standing houses throughout the United States in the 1880s and 90s. Some of the most important characteristics of this style can be clearly seen in Garrett Park houses.

Asymmetrical massing helped to achieve the Picturesque quality so valued in the late Victorian period. Windows were varied in size and placement. Entrances were not centered on the façade. Roofs featured many shapes and angles. Bays projected from the wall planes.



A sense of verticality was emphasized by elevated basements and steep lively rooflines featuring gables, towers, dormers, and prominent chimneys.



Varied wall surfaces were achieved by contrasting zones of clapboards with areas of decorative shingles and applied half-timbering.



The one-story porch was common to virtually all of the houses of this period. It might be attached to the front only or encircle at least two sides of the house, but it was always ample enough to provide an outdoor living space in an area where summers were hot and the principal form of recreation was social interaction.



Decorative detail was a hallmark of the Queen Anne style. In Garrett Park, such detail can be most typically found on the porches: their embellishment ranged from simple square posts and balustrades to turned supports with spindle-work friezes, ornamental brackets, and fanciful railings.



The most elaborate houses in Garrett Park were built on Waverly Avenue leading down to the railroad station and on Kenilworth Avenue along the highest crest of land and the furthest from the noise and soot of the train. There were also several very simple rectangular houses. These were variations on a folk type, but they give a nod to the Victorian era, with a simple front gable and ample porch.



In between the towered, multi-gabled variants and the simple rectangles were a number of houses of varying size and ornamentation. Two houses (11010 Kenilworth and 11013 Montrose) clearly show the transition to the Four-Square style that would become ubiquitous after the turn of the 20th century.



33 of Garrett Park's 19th century houses have survived, along with its general store (4600 Waverly), its chapel (10814 Kenilworth), and its one-room school (now part of the house at 10701 Kenilworth). Four houses have been lost, all to fires. Two burned in 1903 (at 10922 and 10926 Montrose), one in 1923 (11002 Kenilworth), and one in 2007 (11204 Kenilworth). Three carriage houses, two barns and a couple other outbuildings also remain.



Over the years most of the late Victorian houses have been altered, often in response to the difficulty of keeping up the elaborate wooden ornament. Porches have been altered or removed. Asbestos, aluminum or vinyl siding has been added, simplifying maintenance, but at the same time obliterated the distinctive varied surfaces so characteristic of the Queen Anne style. The late 19th century's fascination with decorative detail also fell out of favor as other styles became popular after the turn of the century. The two four-square houses that replaced the burned Victorians on Montrose Avenue (10922 and 10926) illustrate this stylistic change. With their symmetrical facades, low hipped roofs, and lack of ornament, they have a much more quiet and horizontal character than their Queen Anne neighbors.



For much of the 20th century, late Victorian houses with their high ceilings and heavy ornament, were considered to be distinctive, but also outmoded, old fashioned, and even ugly. The last quarter of the century brought a renewed interest nationally in things Victorian, and Garrett Park's large old houses have become its signature buildings. A number of them have emerged from their siding cocoons and now sport elaborate color schemes to highlight their architectural features. Some have been carefully restored while others have been modified to accommodate the desire for large kitchens, family rooms, and master bedroom suites. Indicative of this new-found respect, most new houses built in Garrett Park since the 1970s are Victorian revival in style.



Whether they were regarded as the latest in style or as white elephants, because of their size and prominent locations, the original houses of Garrett Park have always been a prime element of the Town's visual character. It is Garrett Park's late Victorian houses, despite their relatively small numbers, which have set the public image of Garrett Park and continue to do so to this day.